DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 115 CE 078 619

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TITLE Course Design Strategies--Traditional versus On-line. What Transfers? What Doesn't?
PUB DATE 1999-11-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Phoenix, AZ, November 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Comparative Analysis; *Computer Uses in Education; *Conventional Instruction; *Curriculum Design; *Delivery Systems; *Distance Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Masters Degrees; *Online Systems
IDENTIFIERS Canada

ABSTRACT

Although the "basics" of program planning and instructional delivery in traditional face-to-face settings are a good place for instructors to begin when developing online courses, they are only a beginning. When one educator was faced with the task of designing an online course for inclusion in a distance masters degree program for learners across Canada, she obtained help from the first group of students to take the course. By communicating with her students throughout the course, she was able to determine what students gain and lose from online versus traditional instruction. She organized what she learned by Berge's four roles for facilitators of online courses: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Among her suggestions are the following: structure learning goals, assignments, and online discussions clearly; use public and private messages to engage in feedback on all goals and assignments; bring students together face to face once before the course; incorporate threaded discussion features and chat rooms into the course design; address commitment of time and encourage all students to make the commitment; get students online and practicing at least a few weeks before the course; and use complementary distance technologies (video, audio, telephone) when possible. (Contains 21 references.) (MN)

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ED 430 115

Course Design Strategies - Traditional versus On-line

What Transfers? What Doesn't?

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Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education at Phoenix, Arizona, November, 1999

Subsequently Submitted to Alberta Association for Continuing Education Journal

April, 1999

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Introduction

Traditional course design literature stresses the importance of developing an instructional plan to use as a guide for how the instructor and participants spend their time, how they will interact with each other, the materials, and resources. Caffarella's (1994) Planning Programs for Adult Learners provides a useful, research based set of guidelines for program planners. Caffarella's guide reviews and incorporates what we know about adult learning from well established foundational program planner's such as Apps, 1994; Bloom, 1956; Bennett and Clasper, 1993; Brookfield, 1986; Harris, 1989; Mezirow and Associates, 1990; Silberman, 1990; Smith and Delahaye, 1993; and Tracey, 1992 (cited in Caffarella, 1994). The "basics" of planning programs (Caffarella, 1994) and instructional delivery (Cuban, 1993; Goodlad, 1976) in traditional face-to-face (F2F) settings are a good place for the on-line instructor to begin when developing on-line courses, but as I quickly experienced, they are only a beginning.

Background

Three years ago, I was elected to instruct the first on-line course, Leadership in Organizations, in a new distance Master's program via computer mediated conferencing (CMC) using the software program FirstClass. Reflecting back to that first time after "teaching" the course three times to groups of approximately 22 students across Canada, and from my vantage point as director of the program where I assess the experiences of all instructors and students, I realize that my experiences of anticipation, wonder, fear and uncertainty were not unique. I learned in ways that have been both challenging and frustrating. Through it all, as I presented my preliminary findings at conferences, began

reading of other's experiences, and shared with many colleagues who were experiencing their "first" on-line experiences, I began to recognize that my experiences were quite similar to other beginners in on-line instruction (Cyrs, 1997). I, like many of my colleagues, had little if any preparation, training or pilot practice before I plunged into on-line teaching. What I fell back upon was the formal educational background I gained from my degree in Curriculum development (Tyler, 1949) and many years of designing and instructing courses for adults in F2F settings... indeed this stood me in good stead, but it was not enough. The basics of program planning that are so well articulated by Caffarella (1994) got me started....but I quickly realized that new skills must be learned. In true fashion as an adult learner, I began to learn by my experience and so my students became my co-learners.

What Transfers? What Doesn't?

I used the traditional phases for curriculum development including developing learning objectives, detailing content, selecting instructional techniques and materials, and deciding on evaluation procedures. I followed these phases many times before and I followed this sequence again in preparation for my first on-line teaching experience. As I continued to develop the course my mind would try to "image" how to apply this knowledge in an on-line setting, i.e. what would transfer/be helpful, what would be similar/different? Early in the process I discovered that instructional techniques were quite different, and many questions arose. How would we communicate? What would be the social climate? How would I create a sense of a learning community that is so important to adult learning? Serendipitously, I increased the sense of community by

requesting that we share personal profiles and individual pictures. Knowing that people working in small groups might feel more connected, yet anxious about how to organize such interaction in the virtual environment, I decided to require a paired assignment. I required each person to contribute once a week in the general discussion and to limit their contributions to two screens of text. I asked them to extend and follow-up on each other's ideas. These last two requirements I hoped would assure that each student's voice would get heard, that there would be equity in our on-line "classroom."

In essence, I tried to "transplant" my knowledge and experience from traditional F2F instruction to the on-line setting. I speculated about what might transfer and what might not, but most importantly, I learned by experience with the students. Fortunately, our first group of students had already named themselves the "Guinea Pigs". Their sense of humor and a prior meeting for three weeks in a F2F setting resulted in great energy and commitment. We declared ourselves the best of the Guinea Pigs when we finished that first on-line course.

What Worked.....Along the Way

Students indicated in the early weeks of this course that they felt lonely, out of touch, and overwhelmed by the amount of self direction and the volume of reading required on-line. At times, they had difficulty catching the flow and pace of the class, doubted their ability to learn on-line, worried they might not be contributing meaningful messages, and often yearned for F2F contact.

As time went on they disclosed to me what helped them to feel comfortable and more engaged as an on-line learner. They valued meeting and establishing personal

relationships in the F2F portions which occurred prior to the CMC course. They gained confidence hearing others express similar anxieties. Their comfort level increased when they shared thoughts and concerns with each other and when the instructor encouraged and supported them with private messages and with public postings of her own. They indicated that such postings and messages told them that she was "with us." Another aspect of the course that helped them feel engaged was the overall structure of the course which included clear structure with expectations set early in the course. This allowed students some level of comfort in knowing there were no surprises in requirements/expectations. Discussions as a whole group, although sometimes difficult, were connecting and inspirational. Students noted that learning to cite others, being responsible to lead or summarize a week's discussion, modeling of responses from the instructor and from others students, and simply more practice/experience, increased their level of comfort and helped them to feel engaged in the course. Finally, reading about the benefits and drawbacks of CMC from other sources was a great comfort.

Later, they noted they were able to maintain their interest/discipline and commitment to the course by reading many articles on the recommended readings list. For most students it became important to discipline themselves to a consistent schedule of reading and study time. They also found that quiet time to reflect and write about their learning was important as well as finding opportunities to apply concepts within the course to their actual work situations. Students often expressed the sheer joy they felt in belonging to the cohort group and having a sense of place where exploration of their thoughts and feelings were encouraged. Many noted they experienced freedom to think,

challenge, share perspectives, and nurture a growing sense of genuine commitment to the group.

By the end of the course, students were fairly consistent in their view of what was gained and lost in the on-line experience. Many felt the lack of personal contact and noted that they had to struggle to maintain conversational flow and following mixed threads of conversation. They were often concerned about finding ways to ensure air time for all, by balancing verbosity with brevity. They noted many gains, often saying that it was great to hear from many who ordinarily shared little in F2F but shared more in the on-line discussion. They often felt that they genuinely learned more at greater depth and breadth because of the contributions of all in the course. As they spent more time on-line they noted that speaking and writing were different processes and were surprised that writing often resulted in more personal disclosure than they expected. They gained an appreciation for learning through metaphors and mind pictures. Students indicated that they increased their ability to review and organize ideas, and to self-direct their learning. They discovered they could ask for feedback, initiate conversations and engage in dialogue during times and in ways that suited them.

Understanding Our Experience

My first on-line experience sent me in search of more experiential articles from other on-line educators and into many long supportive conversations with a colleague who taught the first on-line elective. To assist in understanding and analyzing the volume of data of many experiences and formal and informal comments provided by students, my colleague and I searched for a framework and discovered Berge's (1995) suggestions for

facilitating/moderating CMC. Berge's model outlines four roles for the facilitator of on-line courses: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. We have since used Berge's model extensively to help us structure our reflections and plan more systematically to learn skills we found we needed to be successful on-line facilitators.

Of Berge's four roles, the managerial and technical elements are somewhat similar in process to those used in planning for traditional courses. The instructor must manage by setting the agenda for the classes/discussion, the objectives, timetable, procedural rules, and decision-making norms. The instructor assumes a technical process role by making students comfortable with any equipment being used so students can concentrate on learning. Although these two elements are similar in process how we manage and the various technologies can be different in the on-line environment.

The processes of Berge's pedagogical and social roles appear to be more significantly different in planning for traditional courses than the managerial and technical roles.. The pedagogical role clearly causes the instructor to question the concept of facilitation, for example, who questions, probes and focuses discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills. In the on-line environment the instructor loses the traditional control afforded in F2F classrooms as students take a more active, facilitative role. The instructor assumes a different social role; to promote human relationship, develop group cohesiveness, maintain the group as a unit, help members work together in a mutual cause, and form a supportive learning environment. These two, pedagogical and social are perhaps the "new skills" most critical to becoming a successful instructor in on-line versus traditional classroom instruction. I have learned from my own experiences, my

students and others (Cook, 1997; Dewar, 1996; Hutton, 1998,1997; Hutton & Gougeon, 1996; Hutton, King & Melichar, 1998; Katz, Wiesenberg & Hutton; 1997;Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996, 1997;) who have shared their experiences in conferences, newsletters, chat lines and journals. Some of those learnings, organized by Berge's four roles are:

Pedagogical

- clearly structure learning goals, assignments and on-line discussions
- engage in feedback on all goals and assignments using private and public messages
- send messages to discussion leaders to acknowledge and affirm their important role
- assist students to become self directed learners by providing them with tools to "learn how to learn" from both the facilitator and other participants strategies
- help students to learn to depend on self and each other for ideas, information and feedback
- connect students to cyberspace experts and other on-line knowledge sources

Social

- bring students together F2F to if at all possible prior to the course
- start the process of creating a collaborative learning environment prior to delivering the course (e.g. talk to students about their individual learning goals and styles)
- ask students to share a personal story of introduction, and model this by sharing your own
- solicit feedback during the course itself (e.g. collect formative feedback at various points), and extend it after the learning event (e.g. collect post-course informal as well as summative feedback from students) in order to maximize you r own learning from the experience
- develop a chatty, and softer tone on-line for the lack of no visual/auditory cues can be particularly challenging for novice CMC participants

- include personal touch of message and be able to write well, witty, engaging humor as the written word carries more weight

- discuss how virtual classroomscan be far more intimate than traditional classroom interactions
-
- give more personalized responses, personal attention, and individualized experience - instructor must live up to those expectations with timely, accurate and sensitive responses

- be explicit in asking students to weave together and acknowledge the contribution of others

- require students to bring their own personal experiences into conversations

Managerial

- create and maintain an inclusive and positive learning environment in a number of active ways, from structuring and re-structuring the discussions, to prompting students to participate (and finding the right balance of participation yourself), to establishing guidelines for on-line contributions, to offering strategies of dealing with "message overload" throughout the course- much of this can be done through modeling appropriate and effective behaviors

- deal directly with students when monologues occurs instead of dialogues and with their frustration with lack of connectedness to other classmates

- incorporate threaded discussion features into the course design

- address the nonsynchronous, text-based nature of CMC - it can benefit less assertive/more reflective students (particularly female) who respond positively to the increased time to think and edit their on-line contributions

- provide more access to a variety of library and internet resources (time can be a disadvantage to taking advantage of this feature)

- address committment of time and encourage it of students--unexpected and additional time requirements can be a major course of frustration and conflict for many

- incorporate chat rooms or cafe icons to bring students together to informally discuss issues

Technical

- make available expert technical support before (to allow the building of key technical skills beforehand), during (to deal with inevitable emergencies and continue assessing with the typically steep learning curve) and after (to allow students assistance during "off hours") the course

- get students on line and practicing at least a few weeks before the course begins if they have not used the technology before

- be aware that technical difficulties or lack of quick help lines can greatly inhibit learning -you must be able to re-direct and give technical guidance to alternate chat room or later discussion in order to keep the primary discussion on track

- use complimentary distance technologies (video, audio, telephone) when possible

Circling the Learning Loop of F2F and On-line Experiences

I have persevered, scrambled, grown and learned truly to become more of a facilitator than a(n) teacher/instructor. The on-line experience challenged me to reevaluate the basics of program planning. I reconfirmed the importance of learning objects, detailing content, selecting materials and formative and summative evaluation. These are all areas of traditional course design that transfer well to the on-line environment. The areas I discerned were the most different for me from "teaching" F2F were that of my role and the heightened importance of developing a learning community.

As an instructor, I experienced a dramatic shift from creating a more competitive environment of the F2F classroom to a more student centered and collaborative environment in the on-line "classroom." Although, the concepts of facilitation and self directed learning are central to adult learning (Apps, 1994; Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1975; Merriam & Caffarella , 1991) for the first time I found I must truly learn to become a facilitator and support students in becoming genuinely self-directed learners. Not unlike

other higher education professionals I experienced the absolute necessity of establishing a learning community which included me (Di Petta, 1998). Without a sense of a learning community the nature of the virtual community can be distant, harsh and dis-connected. Clearly, those of us who engage in virtual environments must build on what we know, what has worked for us in traditional F2F instruction. However, there are new skills to be learned if we are to be successful in the on-line environment (Khan, 1997).

New skills to be learned in the on-line environment arise out of two basic understandings. First, we need to understand that a key distinguishing factor between traditional F2F teaching and on-line facilitation is the dramatic shift in our role from an instructor centered and more authoritarian classroom environment towards a more student centered, collaborative and egalitarian learning environment. And second, we need an understanding that the asynchronous and non-verbal nature of the on-line environment draws special challenges to creating a social learning community that is fundamental to the quality of adult learning.

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